

Case Study: An Ecclesiocentric Congregation Gifts, Challenges, & Pneumatological Opportunity

In this case study, I seek to demonstrate that theological emphases matter in the life of a congregation, for better or worse, and that purposeful introduction of new emphases are necessary at times to bring correction and renewal. In Part One, I introduce the functional theology of Grace Fellowship Community Church (GFCC), a congregation whose life and mission was decidedly shaped by the *ecclesiological* passion and convictions of its founding pastor. GFCC’s core beliefs, and some of their sources, are described. In Part Two, theological writings on the Holy Spirit are discussed in relation to congregational formation, to establish the basis of new, potentially-transformative theological emphases for GFCC. Lastly, in Part Three, an assessment of this potential is presented by further illuminating the ecclesiocentric culture of GFCC, and bringing the findings of Part Two into dialogue with it.

PART I: GFCC’s Ecclesiocentric Foundations

“Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, so that *through the church* the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places (Eph 3:8-10).”

The wisdom of God is revealed *through the church*. This is the meta-truth that captured the imagination of the young, budding pastor Bob Appleby, but not because he witnessed such revelation embodied on the ground in late-60s California. Rather, his deep interest in the *ekklesia*

grew out of bewilderment about evangelical antipathy toward the civil rights movement, as experienced in East Palo Alto, an Anglo community undergoing post-war, demographic transformation in post-war Bay Area. Troubled by racial bigotry in the congregation he attended, and its discontinuity with the Ephesian picture of church (i.e. such segregation is surely not the wisdom of God) Appleby set out to theologically answer one question: What does it mean to *be the Church*?

It was with this ecclesiological passion that Pastor Appleby, in 1983, founded Grace Fellowship Community Church as an offshoot of a Chinese-American, Cumberland Presbyterian congregation based in San Francisco's Chinatown. As a body, we studied the Old Testament roots of the Church, the story of Israel as a people set apart to bear witness to the reign of Yahweh. We came to understand Jesus as the fulfillment of Messianic hope, the good news (or gospel) of a King who defeats sin and evil through his death and resurrection. We began to unpack what it means that the Church is the body of Christ, the living embodiment of the gospel, bearing witness to the world by how we lived as a people under His reign.

One particular book, *The Kingdom of God*,¹ became a core text. As its author, John Bright, writes, “we [came] to the New Testament asking what to do, seeking a program of action. And the New Testament answer is: there shall no program be given you – except to *be the Church*”² (emphasis added). Thus, we increasingly understood the Church not as a religious activity to squeeze into our busy lives, but rather, as the very mission to which the whole of our lives were to be submitted. As one of our founding documents puts it, “we live as His community, called to reflect in our life together the values, concerns, the glories of the Kingdom of God. There is no higher calling, no greater responsibility, no more glorious expression of

¹ John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953).

² Ibid, p. 253.

God's grace for us than this, that we who share the life of God might know and reflect the heart of God to His world.³

Required reading for membership, *Resident Aliens*⁴ provided us with a framework to understand the social dimensions of the Church's presence in the world. In this book, Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon say, "*The Church doesn't have a social strategy, the Church is a social strategy...an alternative way of looking at the political, social significance of the Church.*"⁵ What this meant, philosophically for us, was that "being" took precedence over "doing" or, put another way, our "doing" was to flow out of our "being." How this translated on the ground for us, as a congregation, was that our life as a community (i.e. our gathered life, common liturgies, communal practices, etc.) was deemed of far greater import than any social activism, public service, or professional vocation we might endeavor.

This church-centered orientation of ours is what prompted this remark by the late John Alexander (founding editor of the late 60s magazine, *The Other Side*) in reference to us: "Ya'all have a Reformed theology with an Anabaptist ecclesiology." His ecclesiastical characterization of us was as concise as it was apt. As good Presbyterians, we venerate the pulpit, administering "word and sacrament" and conducting orderly (if lengthy) worship. As functional Mennonites, we uphold a high view of community, enforcing corporate commitments, and employing myriad communal practices (i.e. "we do everything together"). Also, in Anabaptist fashion, we maintain critical distance with the state and possess a vigilant, default suspicion of the dominant culture. In short, we work vigorously to be the "set apart" people of God that the gospel demands. Our commitment appears to pay off, as the watching world finds our life together intriguing, if not threatening, particularly in contrast to the militant individualism that is the San Francisco milieu.

³ Sharon Huey, *Position Paper* (San Francisco, Grace Fellowship Community Church, 1984).

⁴ Stanley Hauerwas & William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

⁵ Ibid, p. 43.

PART II: A Pneumatology for Congregational Formation

It can be said that a congregation can't be more than what its members bring to it, but what is the role of the Holy Spirit? Might a congregation become "greater than the sum of its parts" because there is something supernatural going on beyond the collective body's best efforts? In this section, I draw on a few theological writings in brief, pneumatological response to these questions.

In *Word of God for the People of God*,⁶ Todd Billings calls attention to the work of the Holy Spirit in producing oneness amid a breadth of varying charisms and expressions of service within a congregation. He says, "Paul uses the image of the body of Christ as an image of bounded diversity and differentiation of function within the church. The Spirit unites a diversely gifted body of believers into Christ's body (1 Corinthians 12), and as such the Spirit's work show, for Paul, that salvation is received by faith, not national custom and social affiliation."⁷ His last point, here, is that the Holy Spirit authenticates its role by virtue of the fact that unity is made possible despite profound heterogeneity, culturally, ethnically, and otherwise.

Consonant with this claim is the Spirit's ability to "indigenize" the gospel in any particular culture, in time and space. In other words, the message of the cross will be manifest uniquely in each congregation, given its specific cultural context. Billings goes on to say, however, that "the Christian in habitation of culture is always in need of surgery by the word of God. God's word does not simply inhabit cultures, it transforms them. This transformation is not simply a human work, something that a particular exegetical method can produce through disciplined human effort. It is the work of the Spirit, even as God incorporates and includes human activities in the Spirit's work."⁸ A critical point, for purposes of this essay, is that cultures themselves need converting, which would also include ecclesial cultures. In other words, the

⁶ Todd Billings, *The Word of God for the People of God* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010).

⁷ Ibid, p.116.

⁸ Ibid, p. 123.

work of the Spirit is never done in the transforming of a Christian community, and the religious traditions and theologies from which they derive much of their habits, beliefs, and propensities.

In *Renewing Christian Theology*,⁹ Amos Yong further punctuates the redemptive purposefulness and freedom with which the Spirit moves and acts among God's people. He does so by surfacing the role of the Spirit not at the moment of Pentecost but, rather, in the pre-birth narrative of Elizabeth, an aging, barren, and likely-despised woman. Yong explains that Elizabeth bears witness to the fact that "God shows no partiality" (Luke 10:34) and that "God's gifts, including the gift of His Spirit, are liberally dispensed "to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses" (1 Corinthians 12:11).¹⁰

Significantly, Yong's historical considerations about the spiritual gifts suggests an inverse relationship between institutionalism and charismata: "The gifts seemed to become less important in the life and thinking of the church as it became more organized."¹¹ This mechanical analysis is filled out as Yong illuminates the role of reaction, as in the case of the 16th century magisterial Protestant Reformers who felt charismatic pressure on two fronts: medieval mysticism (e.g. visionary apparitions) on one side and, on the other side, "pockets of Radical Reformers...who insisted they were following the 'inner word' of the Holy Spirit, but whose actions and demands went well beyond the major Reformers' comfort zone."¹²

Such reactions, according to Yong, contributed to ecclesiastical measures to limit the role that the gifts of the Spirit could play within congregational life by, for example, affirming the "absolute priority of scripture" and upholding the "cessationist argument that such phenomena dissipated at the end of the apostolic age."¹³ Such control, however, was difficult to maintain, as

⁹ Amos Yong, *Renewing Christian Theology: Systematics for a Global Christianity* (Waco Texas: Baylor University Press, 2014).

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 58.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 62.

¹² Ibid, p.64.

¹³ Ibid.

Yong points out, with the proliferation of Spirit-filled activity as with the Methodist movement, the Great Awakening, Quakers, Shakers, Pietists, etc., throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Perhaps most germane to the subject at hand is Yong's "Pauline Charismology" which focuses on the nonhierarchical nature of the gifts, i.e. that "each member, given distinct gifts, makes essential and unique contributions to the body, and should be recognized as such."¹⁴ This is critical point for Yong because it flies in the face of the ecclesiastical proclivity to elevate certain gifts (e.g. preaching and teaching) over others as a means to maintain a certain order of things. Instead, Yong argues, the Spirit gives gifts for "the health of the church as the people of God"¹⁵ as a whole, subordinated under the larger rubric of Christ-like love.

In *The Promise of Baptism*,¹⁶ James Brownson draws on a rich theology of "union with Christ," the biblical belief that, through the work of the Holy Spirit, believers are brought into intimate relationship with the Son of God. He describes this work as the "capacity for deep personal knowing of another"¹⁷ for "who knows a person's thoughts except that person's own spirit within? In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11). As such, the Spirit "takes all of Christ's wisdom, life, righteousness, and truth, and brings it to us, uniting us to it."¹⁸

The Spirit's work of bringing us into union with Christ is core to Brownson's understanding of the relationship between the sacrament of baptism and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. While Brownson affirms that the Spirit is received by believers both before and after the baptismal event, he argues that, as a wedding is to a marriage, the sacrament of water is a

¹⁴ Ibid, p.69.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ James Brownson, *The Promise of Baptism: An Introduction to Baptism in Scripture and the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).

¹⁷ Ibid, location 847 (e-version).

¹⁸ Ibid, location 837.

“visible and tangible expression of that self-giving that stands as a unique marker, a sign and seal of our relationship with the Holy Spirit from that time forward.¹⁹”

More importantly, Brownson reminds the reader that baptism is our incorporation into the Church...[and] we know from scripture that the Spirit dwells, in a special and unique way, in the body of Christ.²⁰” Much in consonance with Yong’s charismology, Brownson speaks of the church as “the realm of the Spirit” and that the charismata “find their meaning, their significance, and their inter-relatedness within the body of Christ.²¹” Inasmuch as baptism is that sole sacrament that signifies one’s engrafting into a larger body reality, it must be assumed that the member-connecting Holy Spirit is present, active, and transformative in the immersion (or sprinkling) act. By extension, we can assume the same for the whole of a congregation’s shared, sacramental life. The Spirit is at work, revealing, convicting, converting, and transforming in all kinds of surprising (if uncomfortable) ways within the life of a congregation.

PART III: Assessment: Engaging GFCC’s Ecclesiocentricity Pneumatologically

Being strongly led in “what it means to *be the church*” represented a critical, even prophetic, corrective to the autonomous individualism of the larger culture, and its influence within the mainstream evangelical culture of the 1970s. The American church, at least the church as we knew it, understood Christian faith as a primarily personal-pietistic, “me & Jesus” experience (with church involvement as a helpful source of support). The goal was to get others to “cross the line,” secure their own personal relationship with Jesus, and join a church that embraced the same paradigm.

To understand the Church as a “body politic,” that is, a subversive entity whose life together bore witness to the gospel was, in a word, radical. How much more compelling it was

¹⁹ Ibid, location 874.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

to hear about the church in cosmic terms, i.e. that the Christian community exists as an embodied antithesis to the “rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.” Such a call was also costly (in a good way), as we sacrificed time, money, and opportunities to live as a “company of the committed,” enough so to raise the eyebrows of our neighbors, not to mention other congregations within our denomination and elsewhere. Imagine the impression it made for neighbors to see an army of four dozen church folks move a fellow congregant (and all his furniture and belongings) from one house to another, in less than an hour!

GFCC became the congregation that did everything together, from house moves to wedding showers to funerals. Anytime the church formerly gathered, everyone was expected to be there. New members signed papers committing to attend all Sunday worship services, Thursday bible studies, and bi-weekly home groups (with the occasional vacation or critical family emergency the only exceptions). We could boast of having an 80% core, and a 20% periphery, in reverse formula of the conventional, institutional expectations of that day. Critical to GFCC’s life and mission was simply “showing up.”

To be sure, Woody Allen has a point when pontificating that “90% of life is showing up.” For GFCC, showing up reliably and consistently makes lots of community life possible. We hear the same word together, develop a common theological language, and memorize the same songs. We also parent each other’s children, inhabit each other’s homes, grow old together, and bury each other’s loved ones. We set up and take down chairs like nobody’s business, and run our events like a well-oiled machine. Perhaps most importantly, we establish strong ties with each other, become intimately familiar with the throng (e.g. every joke is an “inside” joke), and know all too well, our personal and collective foibles and idiosyncrasies. With such familiarity comes the potential to see faith lived out in deeper, more nuanced and contextualized ways.

The problem lies in the possibility of making “showing up” *everything* - in service of “being the Church” - with attendance becoming the ultimate measure of Christian faithfulness.

Indeed, such score-keeping (“Did you hear that the Owyangs are going on *another* vacation?”) took root in our relations with one another, and the congregation became divided among those who judge and those who hide in fear of judgement. But attendance is not the same as faithfulness, nor is conformity the same as unity. And yet, as fallen (and culturally-conditioned, deferentially-Asian) creatures, we are prone to reduce our discipleship to the path of least resistance, or at least the one most likely to avert reprimand from the pastoral leadership. As one former member recalls, the message from the top was clear: “Just show up on Sundays and Thursdays. *It’s all we ask!*”

The good news is that the Lord calls His people to something far more rich and mysterious than lockstep obedience to a form. For a congregation with deeply-ingrained reflexes to heed to one authoritative voice, calling us to *be the Church* (as grand and abstract as that may be), it requires a new posture to listen for the Spirit’s leading among us, both individually and corporately. Hence, a pneumatology is needed that fosters space and expectancy for God to move in the creative and unexpected ways among His people. This is why Billings’ and Yong’s work on this critical topic contains much promise for a congregation like GFCC. Not only do they paint an important picture of the active and unpredictable presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church, but also one that can alleviate the fear of change and things new because the Spirit is able, in inexplicable ways, to hold unity and diversity in wondrous tension. This is what the Spirit does, and a congregation can together entrust itself to this.

Brownson’s sacramental theology of the Holy Spirit can remind GFCC congregants of the reality that the Spirit has bound each and every believer intimately and personally to Christ! This frees us from the need to police each other’s “faithfulness” and keep score on who is, and isn’t, loyal to our “eschatological vision,” at least what we can judge based on outward (programmatic) appearances. This does not mean that the Spirit’s work frees us from being involved in each other’s lives. On the contrary, believing that the Spirit is at work in each

member - uniting them with Christ - gives each interpersonal encounter the potential for awe and wonder! In such a spiritual economy, there are no hierarchies of giftedness. In other words, each brother and sister, by virtue of the Spirit's work, can be as much a blessing to me as I am to him or her. Through each other, we witness the mighty acts of God, and the whole body is blessed.

Lastly, a sound pneumatology absolves the most gifted teachers in the congregation from the responsibility (and the presumption and arrogance) of having the final word with the Holy Scriptures. Billings' important insight about the Spirit's dual role in both "inhabiting and transforming" culture (ecclesiastical or otherwise) for a congregation's sake, means that every teacher is also always a learner. Such an assumption gives freedom for a congregation to confront its teachers "as a check and balance on the Spirit's communal work. As the congregation goes to scripture together, other members can point to the scriptural insufficiency of [a particular] view."²² In this way, GFCC's embrace of the reality and presence of the Holy Spirit in its midst not only fosters a necessary humility for spiritual growth and mission, but also heightens the expectation of free and active participation (versus passive submission) of every member in the body.

This final point, I hope, helps to conclude this essay with a rightfully positive note. The critique of our early, defining, ecclesiocentricity does not, in any way, nullify my deepest respect and gratitude for it, or for the founding pastor that gave us this ecclesiological foundation. What I learned about the Church as "an alternative community," or a signpost of the "here and not yet" Kingdom of God, are theological convictions that I hold dear to this day. The wonder of the Holy Spirit is that who we are as a congregation today will be, without shadow of doubt, very different ten years from now. We shall never cease to need correction and renewal along the way. Toward this end, may we together continue to bring ourselves to God and His Word with deep humility, gratitude, and joy. To God be the glory.

²² Todd Billings, p. 135.